

THE FIRST CENTURY OF THE NEW BRUNSWICK STAGE

By ORAL SUMNER COAD

PART III¹

1872

THE year opened impressively and unintelligibly with Charley Shay's Monster Quincuplexal Exposition, "Positively the Largest and best on Earth," on January 3rd and 4th. It is a trifle disappointing to discover that Mr. Shay merely provided another variety show involving a burlesque *Blue Beard*, a pantomime, a dog act, acrobatic feats, and the like. Probably no one had difficulty in understanding Tony McCrystal's announcement of his Female Minstrels and French Can-Can for February 1st. Clearly sophistication was overtaking New Brunswick. The ultimate in sophistication of that era was the famous—or, as some would have it, infamous—extravaganza, *The Black Crook*. Although it had not yet been exhibited in this city, on July 9th Hooley's Minstrels made so bold as to present a burlesque of this shocking show. Some half-dozen other minstrel and variety troupes came to town during the year, but perhaps we have already said enough and to spare about minstrel and variety troupes.

The season brought the usual complement of circuses and more than the usual number of distinguished circus names. On April 18th arrived "P. T. Barnum's Great Travelling Museum, Menagerie, Caravan, Hippodrome, Polytechnic Institute, International Zoological Garden and Dan Castello's Morally Refined Circus," and for August 28th his rival and future associate, not to be outdone in high-sounding labels, advertised "Geo. F. Bailey & Co.s Quadruple Combination Menagerie, Circus, Gymnasium and Grand Musical Accompaniment."

But these varied amusements did not crowd the more strictly dramatic events out of the calendar. The local amateurs gave two more "parlor entertainments" on January 19th and 30th, the first

¹ Part I of this article appeared in the *Journal* of December, 1941, and Part II in the issue of June, 1942.

consisting of an elaborate charade and a three-act satire on the woman's rights movement entitled *The Spirit of '76, or the Coming Woman*, while the second was made up of three short plays. Again the German actors held forth, this time the Dramatic Harmonie Society of Elizabeth, which gave *The Werrwarr* on March 18th at Saenger Hall. Still another amateur event of March 27th and 28th was a minstrel show got up by the college students for the benefit of the Rutgers Boating Association. The *Fredonian* pronounced it "very creditable to the performers, amusing and satisfactory to the large audiences, and beneficial (pecuniarily) to the Boating Association to the extent of \$100 or more."

The most ambitious amateur production yet attempted in New Brunswick was *The Color Guard*, presented by Kearny Post No. 15 of the G.A.R. during the week of March 11th. This so-called "military allegory" by Col. A. R. Calhoun was more nearly a drama, with a love story running through it to bind the soldier scenes together. The production was so extensive that the meagre stage of Greer's Hall had to be built out into the auditorium. The acting was declared to be excellent, and the receipts were over \$1,200. On December 9th *The Color Guard* was revived for another week.

The professionals were much more in evidence this year than in 1871. First to come was Albert Aiken, supported by his New York company, who presented on January 29th *The Witches of New-York*, described as a realistic play of city life. This piece, of Aiken's own authorship, was being given repeatedly in the metropolis. Early in June the Sappho Lyric Comedy Company, featuring Kate Ellis, a twelve-year-old actress who used the stage name of Sappho, gave *The Little Treasure*, which the *Fredonian* considered excellent and in which Sappho displayed "quite a high order of talent." But a second performance was canceled because of a suit over the guardianship of the precocious miss.

Amy Stone and her troupe stopped off on August 10th to give a single performance of *Cigarette*. On October 23rd came William Horace Lingard and his wife, Alice Dunning, with their company of fifteen. He was a well-liked New York actor and manager, and she was a beautiful and vivacious woman, who, writes Professor Odell, won "great favour in New York in the '70s, and in London in

the '80s."² Their bill consisted of Charles Dance's long popular comedietta, *Delicate Ground*, the old farce, *The Day After the Wedding*, and Lingard's much applauded impersonations of celebrities, such as Brigham Young, General Grant, and Horace Greeley (the two latter being rival candidates for the Presidency).

A much less finished type of entertainment was provided on December 16th by the Wallace Sisters' Opera, Burlesque, and Comedy Troupe. Singing, dancing, orchestral music, and two farces, *The Wrong Man* and *Aladdin, or the Wonderful Scamp*, made up a program which disappointed many because of the extravagant mode of acting and costuming. A more serious complaint, however, was brought by the *Fredonian* against a part of the audience, namely, the rougher element among the young fry, which indulged in rowdyism throughout the evening, hooting and yelling without check from the proper authorities. Indeed one gathers from occasional newspaper comments that such hoodlumism was all too commonly displayed at Greer's Hall. Perhaps the worst instance occurred two years before at a lecture by one Professor Joseph Green. The rowdies, having punctuated his discourse with disorder from the beginning, turned off the gas when he was about half finished and drove him from the stage with a shower of beans, corn, and shot. Let us end the year, however, in a more elevated strain by recording "An Evening of the Passions" on December 28th by J. Prescott Eldridge, who imitated eminent orators and actors, and portrayed such passions as hate and love, sorrow and joy.

1873

The last year in which Greer's Hall dominated the local amusement field began promisingly on January 2nd with a one-night appearance of the popular Amy Stone and her Dramatic Alliance in "her specialties," *Wild Meg* and *The Irish Diamond*. On January 10th and 11th a panorama called *Hiberniana* was accompanied by an Irish farce written by one of the managers and actors, Jerry Cohan, father of our lamented contemporary, George M. March 17th and 18th saw the Irish still firmly in control of the situation when Caroline Hayes, a New York actress, and J. H. Mulligan, with a supporting company, gave *The Ticket-of-Leave Man* and *Uncle*

² G. C. D. Odell, *op. cit.*, VIII (1936), 529.

Tom's Cabin. The *New Brunswick Daily Times* of the 18th reported that "the rowdies who frequent Greer's Hall during performances" were given a warning the previous night when Special Officer Wilcox removed one disturbance-maker. But the warning went unheeded, for the next evening one or two more hoodlums had to be ejected. The *Times* of the 19th further remarked that the actors in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* were frequently applauded, "which is something extraordinary for a New Brunswick audience to do." Surely the town's riotous youths and paralyzed adults would not provide the most congenial environment for play acting.

As a matter of fact Greer's Hall was losing caste in several respects. When the Raritan Boat Club got up an amateur program for March 28th, consisting of a "domestic tragedy," *Babes in the Woods*, and a farce, *D'Ye Know Me Now?*, the hall chosen was Saenger not Greer's. The *Times* of the 28th observed that "There is no question of the superiority of Saenger over Greer's Hall when the arrangement of the stage is taken into consideration"—not, by the way, the first indication of the inadequate stage equipment at the Burnet Street establishment. The Boat Club appears to have been satisfied with its choice, for it gave a second program—*Look Before You Leap*, a one-act comedy, and *New Brooms Sweep Clean*, a farce—at Saenger on April 23rd. Meanwhile Saenger Hall continued to offer German drama or at least drama for Germans. On March 24th a German troupe (presumably amateur) from Newark and Elizabeth gave *David Garrick*, on May 19th the Harmonie Club of Elizabeth presented the farce, *Wie denken sie darüber?*, and on October 7th three short plays made up a bill that the *Times* called a success, unlike the previous attempts at German drama.

But Greer's Hall still housed the professional bands. Here Lannier's Dramatic Company gave *Wedded, Yet No Wife* on April 22nd with the Dutch comedian, Thomas W. Bolas, and Jennie Carroll, a minor New York player, in the leading rôles; here Agnes Wallace (of the Wallace Sisters) and her Burlesque and Comedy Troupe presented *Mischief Making* and a burlesque *Robin Hood* on May 23rd; and here, on May 29th, appeared the most noted actress yet seen in New Brunswick, none other than Fanny Herring, the unrivaled favorite of the Bowery Theatre audiences, who gave *The Female Detective*, in which she acted six parts. Yet even greater thrills were in store when, on September 8th, F. G. Maeder's melo-

drama, *Buffalo Bill, King of the Border Men*, was performed, with Buffalo Bill, Texas Jack, and Wild Bill Hickok appearing in person together with a corps of Indians. The jam at Greer's Hall was said to be terrific.

The substantial number of plays this year did not mean that New Brunswick was deprived of its favorite amusements. At least eight minstrel or variety shows came to town, and four circuses made glad the youthful heart, one of which, Murray's Railroad Circus, on September 19th included the "spectacular equestrian drama" of *Dick Turpin's Ride to York and the Death of Black Bess*.

But our chronicle of the century comes to an end not with black-face jollity or the glories of the tan-bark arena, but with the failure of a play at Greer's Hall. On November 13th, 14th, and 15th a temperance drama, *Three Years in a Man Trap*, based on a story by T. S. Arthur, was presented by the Connolly Brothers of Philadelphia with the aid of local talent. Starting well, the audiences rapidly dwindled despite the advertised appeal of a burning house and a snow storm on the stage, until on the third night the receipts did not equal the expenses. Perhaps the indifference of the playgoers was occasioned by the imminent opening of a new theatre, which was to dwarf Greer's Hall into insignificance. After two years of building, the Masonic Hall, on the corner of George and Albany Streets now occupied by the Whelan Drug Company, was all but completed. On November 24th the splendid and spacious new opera house which it contained was formally opened with a concert by the New Brunswick Choral Society and visiting soloists; and from this time forward Greer's Hall ceased to count.

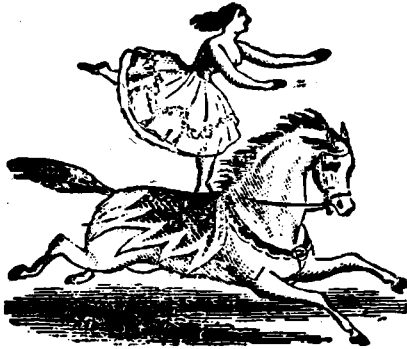
It was high time for New Brunswick to take stock of its theatrical status and to bid for a higher level of stage art than the town was accustomed to. Undoubtedly the *Fredonian* of July 25th reflected the opinion of many cultivated citizens when, looking forward to the completion of Masonic Hall, it remarked:

A few first-class entertainments at the opening would no doubt do much to give the new Opera House a popular reputation, and elevate the character of our amusement-loving public, and render less popular the nigger-shows and other demoralizing performances that have so long held sway in this City, mainly because we have had no proper place for first class entertainments.

Perhaps "demoralizing" is too strong a word, but most of the exhibitions at Greer's Hall could scarcely add much to the cultural

standing of the town. When that auditorium was opened in 1853, it was probably adequate to the modest theatrical needs of a small town, but twenty years later New Brunswick was a thriving little city of over 15,000 with a greatly increased interest in the drama, as a comparison of the three instalments of this paper will at once make clear, yet it had no accommodations for other than small, second-rate troupes. Probably the most profitable audience Greer's Hall ever held, with the best seats selling at the maximum price of seventy-five cents, brought in no more than \$300. Little wonder, then, if none of the major players of the period ever appeared at the Burnet Street house. But with the opening of Masonic Hall, the city was equipped with a modern and capacious theatre, which at once ushered in a new and far more dignified era in the history of the New Brunswick stage.

Acknowledgment: It is a pleasure to express my obligation to those who have aided me with counsel and comfort in the preparation of this paper. I should like especially to mention Mr. John P. Wall, indefatigable historian of New Brunswick, Mr. Elmer T. Hutchinson, zealous and generous antiquarian, Mr. Alexander S. Graham, whose vivid memories of the local stage are a valuable source of knowledge, and Dr. Rudolf Kirk, who first encouraged me to undertake this study, and who has done what he could to keep it within reasonable limits.



*From the New Brunswick Daily
Fredonian, May 10, 1872*